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ABSTRACT

The role of the college or university in facilitating the ethical and moral development of college students is addressed. The views of Kohlberg, Perry, and others who have studied ethical and moral development are briefly reviewed. These psychologists suggest that there is a hierarchy or continuum for the development of moral reasoning. Colleges and universities may also be viewed as representing a continuum, with some having an orthodox view of right and wrong, and others being more concerned about expanding the horizons of their students and providing them an opportunity to develop an ability to make reasoned ethical decisions. Higher education institutions see their roles and responsibilities for the ethical and moral development of their students in different ways depending on the institution's mission and character. To help students learn to raise questions and to examine moral issues, the faculty and administration may wish to take thoughtful and examined stands on moral and ethical issues and engage in open discussion and deliberation about difficult moral problems. (Author/SW)

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"The Responsibility of Colleges and Universities for Building Ethical and Moral Character in Their Students"

Abstract

This paper, presented as part of a panel at the 1982 annual meeting of the American Council on Education, comments on some of the literature on the ethical and moral development of college students (Kohlberg, Gilligan, Perry, Bok), and suggests that the role of the college or university in facilitating this development has changed over time. Kohlberg, Perry and others, who have studied ethical and moral development, suggest that there is a hierarchy or continuum of moral reasoning along which individuals develop. Colleges and universities may be seen as arrayed on a similar continuum, with some having an orthodox view of right and wrong, and others being more concerned about expanding the horizons of their students and providing them an opportunity to develop an ability to make reasoned ethical decisions. Colleges and universities see their roles and responsibilities for the ethical and moral development of their students in different ways depending on the institution's mission and character.

To help students learn to raise questions and to examine moral issues for themselves, the faculty and administration should take thoughtful and examined stands on moral and ethical issues and engage in open discussion and deliberation about difficult moral problems.

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THE RESPONSIBILITY OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES FOR BUILDING ETHICAL AND RELIGIOUS CHARACTER IN THEIR STUDENTS?[1]

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We come together to discuss "the responsibilities of our institutions for building ethical and religious character in our students."

Starting with the second of these two qualities: "religious character" may be understood to refer to the values, ideals and principles of a system of faith or belief. Institutions have different responsibilities with respect to building religious character depending on their mission and their orientation or control. Colleges and universities that are supported by, or affiliated with, religious denominations not uncommonly adopt the goal of building the character of their students in conformity with particular religious principles. Non-sectarian universities and colleges, and state institutions, should not and ordinarily do not endeavor to hold the building of "religious character" as an institutional objective.

The non-sectarian and state universities often provide a forum for religious groups and affiliates--Newman Clubs, Hillel groups and the like--to provide various kinds of educational, cultural, social and spiritual services for

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students who voluntarily elect participation in them. Those of us in such institutions might take pains to see to it that the range of these extracurricular opportunities for religious education and expression represents the diversity of religious and cultural backgrounds found in our student body. We may also offer courses in comparative religion, in the history and philosophy of religion, and the like, but we refrain from establishing a particular set of religious principles as institutional goals.

The issue of an institution's role and responsibility for the development of "ethical character" in its students poses other questions. One involves the issue of whether ethical character is an educable quality, like intellect, and, if it is, what are the learning experiences that occasion its development? Or, is ethical character more analogous to height, which we acquire in various amounts over time, influenced some by nutrition and exercise, but more by genetic endowment? A related question is whether ethical beliefs, as expressed in classroom discussions and in response to the psychologist's questionnaire, correlate with ethical behavior in real situations? There is some evidence, both experimental and anecdotal, to suggest that we do not yet know how to accurately predict ethical behavior.

Another set of questions centers around the issue of to what extent the institution, as an administrative entity, should assume responsibility for, or take leadership in, providing for the ethical education of its students. Or whether the ethical development of students is, like course content, a matter best left to individual faculty and peer review. Another way of phrasing this question is to ask what is <u>our</u> role, as leaders and formal representatives of

our institutions, in the ethical development of our students as distinct from the role of our faculty? On what ethical and value issues should we, or should the institution as a whole, take a stand? Should we avoid taking institutional positions while encouraging individuals on our faculties to form independent views?

In days gone by, the college president was expected to uphold the catechism and moral virtue at his institution by inspecting the library and by visiting the classrooms to assure himself, the trustees and the parents that the institution was providing the proper ethical and moral environment for its students. Until fairly recent times, the presidents of many of our institutions were responsible for lecturing the students on ethical standards and moral philosophy, and for hiring a faculty possessing ethical and moral virtue.

The didactic teaching of ethics by college presidents as the standard bearers of virtue for their institutions and the certainty of ethical and moral views and values is well replaced by instruction, both undergraduate and graduate, and in the various disciplines, that helps students raise and consider the ethical questions that they are and will be confronted with in their lives and in their professions. Such courses and discussions are a vital part of a collegiate or university education and should be encouraged. Whether we should require courses on ethics is a matter probably best left to the curriculum committees of our institutions.

Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg has developed the concept of stages of ethical or moral development. In Kohlberg's view, there is a hierarchy of ethical judgment that ascends from stage one, characterized by ego centrism and doing right to avoid punishment, through successive stages in which, at stage two, one accepts the rights of others and, at stage three, attempts to live by the golden rule. At stage four, one recognizes the need to contribute to the larger group or society. Stage five morality brings an awareness of the variety and the relativity of values and opinions held by people in different groups and cultures, as well as the concept that certain values and rights, such as life and liberty, are not relative, but should be upheld in any society regardless of majority opinion. In Kohlberg's sixth and highest stage, individuals develop a commitment to universal moral principles.

Kohlberg's work is much debated, both by his former students and by others who question the universality of his conclusions and the details of the specific levels of his schema. Most striking is the contribution of Carol Gilligan, whose recent book, In a Different Voice, sets out the view that psychological and moral theory, developed primarily by men, has neglected and misunderstood the personality and motivations of women. The moral development of women is more involved with caring and with a web of personal relationships, she argues, while the moral development of men is more focused on the concept of impartial justice.

After reading Kohlberg's critics, one is still left with the concept of a hierarchy of moral development even if the stages are imprecise, perhaps different for men and women, and even if people may be uncooperatively at more

than one stage at the same time. With age and experience, people seem to develop the ability to engage in more complex moral reasoning, to examine right and wrong behavior in terms of social norms and situational context, and to perceive moral and ethical conflicts in terms of the moral imperatives of the sanctity of human life and respect for the individual. It appears that one way to ascend this hierarchy of ethical and moral values is to be in the company of people who are at a higher stage. Those midway on the hierarchy will benefit from the examples of people who are slightly "higher" than they, although they may not understand or communicate well with those too much "above" them.

College is a time when students' acquired ideas and values are challenged and questioned, when they begin to develop an awareness of alternative models and values, and when they begin to reassemble the pieces for themselves in their own order, with their own new commitments, sometimes tentative, sometimes firm.

William G. Perry, Jr., in a classic study, Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years, published originally in 1968, prior to and independent of Kohlberg's work, describes a sequence of eight developmental stages: from what he calls "embeddedness," in which we unquestioningly accept the moral values of our families; to actualization, in which we have arrived at our own new synthesis. In the initial stage or position, often completed before a student enters college, students have a dualistic view of the world: they believe that there are right and wrong answers, that the faculty know those answers, and that their role is to learn the right answers from the faculty. At position two, when students feel frustrated at not being told the

right answers by their teachers, they come to believe that while there are right answers known by the faculty, the faculty want them to learn for themselves how to find those answers. In successive positions, three, four and five, students become aware of the multiplicity of answers that exist for many problems. They develop a relativistic view that there are many answers, but believe that, since this is the case, one person's views on moral and ethical issues are as good as anyone else's. In the higher positions, six through nine, students come to see the necessity of personal commitment in a relativistic world and begin to develop such commitments in their lives. Although most students progress through the main line of personal ethical development, Perry suggests that some are deflected from this development, escaping or retreating to a more simplified view of the world; perhaps requiring a moratorium before advancing again.

In Perry's view, the growth from unexamined absolutes, to relativism, to commitment pervades the entire curriculum, and is not the province of one or another course or major field. In this view, common to Perry and, I suppose, to Plato, ethical education, the raising of ethical issues and questions, learning how to think about and reason through moral problems is and should be part of the instruction in virtually every discipline and need not be confined to a single subject such as philosophy or religion.

Much ethical and moral learning takes place without overt discussion and examination and constitutes a "hidden curriculum." Students learn by watching what we do and say, or fail to do and say, in response to ethical issues and dilemmas. As communities of scholars, we must take pains to discuss our actions and the reasons for our decisions.

If there is a hierarchy of moral and ethical development through which individuals move, as suggested by Perry, Kohlberg and others, it is interesting to speculate on whether our institutions are not arrayed on a similar continuum as well, with some having a more orthodox view of right and wrong and others more concerned about expanding the internal and external horizons of our students and providing them an opportunity to develop a reasoned ability to make ethical decisions. I suspect that many institutions have developed along this continuum over time as the concept of morality has changed in our society.

In discussing the moral development of students in his recent book, Beyond the Ivory Tower, Harvard President Derek Bok suggests that many universities have gone from an absolute view of morality, through a period of relative unconcern for moral education, because of the uncertainty about basic values in our society, to a new, post-Watergate era in which we are again concerned about teaching ethics and values. If Bok's history is correct, this discussion of the role of the college or university in building ethical character would have been unnecessary fifty or one hundred years ago because institutions had a clearer view of their role in those years.

After being out of fashion for some time, a new concern for ethics and morality is growing out of national experiences with public behavior; both around the seemingly "simple" issues of lying, cheating, stealing and bribery to the more complex issues involving biomedical research, relations with politically and socially repressive nations, the redress of social inequities in our own country, and the like.

There is a resurgence of interest in ethics in the liberal arts curriculum as well as a new level of interest in ethics as part of the curriculum of professional schools of law, business, medicine and others. A recent survey of 1,200 business schools and colleges, conducted by the Center for Business Ethics at a college near Boston, reported a 500 percent increase in business ethics courses since 1973. The interest in professional ethics continues to grow, seemingly as much the result of student interest as faculty or institutional design. A number of universities, through their programs in continuing professional education, have provided leadership in discussing ethics with practitioners and professionals in various fields, as well as with their regular students.

In talking about ethics, it is often easier to raise questions than to answer them. I have done so this morning. I do believe that our institutions will see their roles and responsibilities in different ways depending upon their separate missions and character. An urban, commuter university with many adult students enrolled in professional programs will carry out its concern for ethical education in ways different than a residential liberal arts college.

I believe that ethical and moral development is part of the general psychological growth and development of students. Having a mature set of ethical and moral values is part of having a developed and mature personality, a strong sense of one's character and identity. It is a quality that we endeavor to foster and encourage as a consequence of the entire collegiate experience. The role of the faculty in developing this quality is not to be

didactic or exhortatory, but to help students raise questions and examine moral issues for themselves. The faculty, and we, should be seen as taking examined and thoughtful stands on moral and ethical issues, engaging in discussion and deliberation about difficult moral problems.

While we should pursue virtue as we understand it, we should also take pains to communicate to students both the complexities of issues and the reality of our limitations and lack of perfection.

Although many, perhaps most, moral questions are best resolved by the individuals in our institutions acting independently, in their own ways, there are some issues on which it may be appropriate to take an institutional stance. In those situations, it is especially important that the position be arrived at by rational examination of the issue and by open discussion.

Whether or not we are successful in building the ethical character of our students, in helping them achieve a developed sense of identity or actualization of their personality, depends on many factors beyond our control, including what is happening in their families and in the larger society. Nonetheless, we must make a sustained effort, not only to use Derek Bok's phrase "because the subject matter is interesting and the problems intellectually challenging, but also because the goal is so important to the quality of the society in which we live."